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Engendering Social Consciousness through First Year Information Literacy Classes

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Abstract

Information literacy classes are becoming common on college campuses to help first year students learn information search skills necessary for higher education. Free speech debates on some college campuses have bred a level of student activism not seen since the 1960s. Academic librarians can play a key role to educate students in First Year Information Literacy (FYIL) classes with a social justice context inclusive of race, gender and free speech.

Keywords: academic library instruction; first year information literacy; social justice

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Engendering Social Consciousness through First Year Information Literacy Classes

Introduction

First Year Information Literacy (FYIL) courses taught by librarians can support students learning basic skills to engage social justice issues constructively on college campuses. Traditionally information literacy skills include learning to manage library resources, create and refine effective database searches, locate books, articles, journals, and distinguish between scholarly and popular sources while evaluating their credibility (The University of Notre Dame, 2017). Information literacy courses can impact the first year of college which is crucial because students are developing their identity and stance on political issues (UCLA Newsroom 2016). Presently, because of the volatile political climate on some campuses, librarians can take on a larger role of educating for academia and life.

Librarians in FYIL classes can teach students how to glean legitimate information sources they can use when making decisions that have personal and political ramifications in confronting political issues. A *USA Today* article notes a drastic increase in activist students not seen since the 1960s where one out of ten students are likely to be politically active on campus (Smith, 2017). The role of the librarian and the FYIL class would be the same for any information literacy course providing students with research skills on topics and issues and ethical responses. I am proposing an FYIL class focused on social justice issues of race, gender, free speech and the ethical use of social media. In the social justice FYIL class, the librarian can guide students to engaging texts and legitimate information sources that can enlighten and provide insight into oppositional points of view and possibly find some common ground for a solution on and beyond college campuses.

Information Literacy and Race

Developing literacy skills while delving into issues of race, gender and free speech can accomplish a two-fold goal of learning research skills, the efficacy of the library and becoming informed on issues prominent in today's media and social media. Assignments can center around locating legitimate information with skills applicable in any campus course and in a student's personal development.

Using databases, students can identify legitimate and scholarly information around race and culture in America. For example, students can verify the authenticity of information on a

Civil Rights website that speaks to the issues Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spearheaded with racial equality in America. Sites that represent white supremacist groups such as Stormfront, (2018) will appear in Google searches with racially unbiased civil rights sites such as The King Center (The King Center, 2018). Since both sites advertise the name Martin Luther King Jr., the implication is that both sites contain unbiased information on the Civil Rights leader and the movement. Investigating further, students understand how sites can mislead with a uniform resource locator (URL), and interpret information differently based upon their own political agendas.

FYIL assignments can help students to discern the difference between popular articles from the internet and scholarly/peer reviewed journals from academic databases. Assigned a particular issue such as police brutality and the black community, students can widen their literacy skills by choosing relevant databases that are interdisciplinary, sociological or psychological in emphasis.

On police brutality in the African American community, an interdisciplinary database search may return several articles including *From Stopping Black People to Killing Black People* in the scholarly journal California Law Review (Carbado, 2017). Students can learn about issues around the 4th Amendment and police engagement of black people, but compare the scholarly piece to a news article from a conservative news site like Yellowhammer News (Stossel, 2018). Yellowhammer News offers alternative views on black issues through, for example, black conservative Candace Owens (Hughes, 2017) who rapper Kanye West lauded in her criticism of “liberal” black politics in America and caused a social media backlash of viral proportions (TMZ, 2017). Using *The California Review*, online news platforms like Yellowhammer and shows like TMZ, the FYIL librarian can refine information literacy critical skills across academic, political and popular culture outlets.

Information Literacy and Gender

Gender issues on campus can be another means to teach researching skills in the FYIL class including rape and sexual assault. One in five female students will be sexually assaulted while in college as well as 5% of college men (Jaschik 2015). When using an interdisciplinary database such as Academic Search Complete, students can delve deeper into the issue of rape culture, identifying what it is and learning skills to counter it. If the search term “rape on college campuses” in scholarly and peer reviewed articles entered into Academic Search Complete only returns six articles for the years 2015-2018, students can be asked to identify what might impact the small return of scholarly articles. Students can then be instructed to

remove the “scholarly and peer reviewed” search frames to see how many articles are returned. When students assess the number of articles in an academic database over the three-year period, they can determine how much the topic has been researched as opposed to general reporting in mainstream magazines and newspapers. Students can draw conclusions to an issue’s relevance in society by date, who is reporting or studying the issue and debate the issue of sexism, if any, in publications.

Additionally, students can extend their interactions with the campus community by bringing into the FYIL classroom representatives from local rape crisis centers and campus counselors to support student information and research efforts. Upper class students can present in FYIL classes as well to address the student experience and expectations of behavior on the college campus. Not only do students gain research skills, they become aware of campus services and the faces of the people they can talk to, all arranged through librarians and the FYIL process.

Another current gender studies topic students can research in the FYIL class is sexual violence and the #metoo movement (me too, 2018). Looking at issues of gender in FYIL classes can include not only women but men who have complained about sexual harassment in the film industry (Sugarman, 2018). Using gender studies databases, articles are curated from the keyword “metoo movement” to find magazine listings. Scholarly articles from sociology databases would be researched for information and its dissemination through statistics and data on sexual assault (Mcdaniel and Rodriguez, 2017). The FYIL class can become the ground for improving understanding and communication, what “No” means in an intimate encounter and the role of alcohol, drugs and perception in sexual assault especially on college campuses while teaching students different modes of research by discipline.

Gender in a socio-cultural context can be taught in FYIL classes as well. Jennifer Ferretti used Beyoncé’s video suite *Lemonade* to encourage students to pursue the issues of race, gender and activism while utilizing databases to analyze issues raised in the popular singer’s montage (Ferretti 2017). Engaging students with a popular topic like *Lemonade*, they are introduced to the Black Panthers, historical and social African culture in Orishas like Oshun, and issues of black women and the historical impact of American slavery on modern love. *Lemonade* provides impetus to search art, literature and history databases on black resistance and its dissemination through authors like Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler or Noam Chomsky and art forms as extensive as architecture of the antebellum South and French Renaissance portraitures (Okeowo, 2017). Database searches whether specific or

interdisciplinary around *Lemonade* topics can bridge media, scholarly and non-scholarly sources for students to draw informed conclusions about the impact of gender and race on society and activism. In addition, *Lemonade* also allows students to learn about the intersectionality of race and gender, art, history, the lives of black women and their social relationships in their communities.

Information Literacy and Free Speech

With the current political climate, free speech has become a talking point on campuses across the nation. In FYIL classes, students can investigate “fake news” and “political correctness” in politics and media and what the terms actually mean in modern political discourse (fredtopeka, 2017). Alternative right or alt right free speech has become hotly debated on campuses across the United States including Lewis and Clark College, The University of Central Florida, Texas A & M University, Auburn, and The University of California Berkeley because of proponents like Richard Spencer credited with creating the term “alt-right,” and Milo Yiannopolous (Simon, 2018). The Southern Poverty Law Center defines alt-right as a collection of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that white identity and white people are under attack by multiculturalism and social justice (SPLC, 2017). Teaching information literacy courses can engage students on issues around free speech, who has a right to it and how college campuses might deal with an alt right speaker like Milo Yiannopolous. In particular, some Cal State Berkley students wanted Milo Yiannopolous to have a platform citing Yiannopolous as an example of the lack of free speech on campus and attacks on conservative student groups (The Associated Press, 2017). Alt-right individuals and groups are often at the center of campus controversies and some students do not want them on campus due to their extremist views on race. The SPLC notes that college campuses are targets for recruitment for young people to fill alt-right ranks with fresh recruits and establish themselves on campus in equal standing with campus diversity initiatives (2017).

Opponents think the college campus should be the place to debate opposing ideas in a collegial manner. Television host and comedian Bill Maher has been a serious critic of campuses that will not allow unpopular speakers a podium even if he personally disagrees with them (Cheng, 2017). He believes academic venues to be the place to debate the issues, not ban unpopular views and the people who espouse them.

On the other hand, students opposed to alt-right or even conservative speakers do not believe a college campus is the place to give bigoted views a platform. Critics of the alt-right

movement on campuses believe speakers like Milo Yiannopoulos, Richard Spencer or conservative writer Ann Coulter stifle critical thinking. Opponents believe their conservative views support white supremacist tropes of racial superiority of white people and establish white people as culturally besieged by the gains of historically disenfranchised groups in America (Anti-Defamation League, 2017).

FYIL classes can have students research the facts of oppositional views and make sober decisions about their own stance and that of the universities they attend. One of the primary means of alt-right recruitment is through fear and xenophobia around issues of race, ethnicity, religion, and class. FYIL classes can counter some of the anxiety of having alt right groups on campus by educating students with legitimate information sources from history and newspaper databases instead of propaganda. Students could use social media platforms to highlight information necessary for the debate and defuse misleading information that might incite violence during campus protests. The SPLC offers a means to counter the misinformation of hate groups on campus by encouraging students to take diversity classes (2017). FYIL classes could be part of that educational process.

Information Literacy and Social Media

Allegations of Russia using social media accounts to support the 2016 Donald Trump presidential campaign and undermine that of Hillary Clinton have become common news stories in the media (Issac and Wakabayashi, 2017). Before the 2016 presidential election, social media was seen as a platform for private rants, political and social leanings, conspiracy theories, anecdotes and personal revelations about relationships gone right or wrong. If anything, Senate hearings on Russia, Facebook and the 2016 presidential election reveal the importance of social media as a legitimate information tool with massive political impact on politics (C-SPAN, 2018). The primary means through which people ages 18-34 get news information is some form of mixed social media that might include Facebook, texts, Twitter etc. (American Press Institute, 2015). Black Lives Matter used social media to push its agenda and as one study found college students were more likely to get their information on Black Lives Matter from social media than traditional media outlets like CNN (Cox, 2017). FYIL classes can help train students to investigate legitimate information sources whether academic or pedestrian, blogs, tweeted nuggets of information, Facebook, YouTube or news outlets.

Conclusion

The FYIL classes including social justice issues should be a 3-hour credit course as opposed to a 1-hour credit course that some colleges offer on information literacy. This would help legitimize the FYIL class as an interdisciplinary support to other departments on campus to develop research and information literacy skills (Cohen et al., 2016).

The necessity for FYIL class skills was the topic of the popular Hulu/Freeform television show *Grown-ish*. The episode, *Erase Your Social*, highlighted the blunder of its resident black social justice warrior Aaron Jackson who unwittingly retweets an alt right website and becomes the black face for the alt-right (Barris, 2018). The resultant fallout is humorous as Aaron goes from the darling of social justice warriors to their sell out villain, but it points out the serious nature of how unvetted information can impact legitimate efforts to raise social consciousness.

Developing critical research skills along with cultural comprehension through FYIL classes can set an educational paradigm worthy of a democratic nation priding itself on uninhibited access to knowledge and freedom of speech.

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